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**PROFILE: DR ADEWUMI
DAMILOLA ADEBAYO**

Damilola Adebayo is a historian on the rise. With a recent PhD from Cambridge, he began his scholarly journey at the University of Ibadan, followed by an MA in Geneva. And with an interest in histories of infrastructure, he stakes his place on the frontiers not only of African history but other historiographies too. Coming out of the directions championed by the African Economic History Network (AEHN), his doctoral thesis was titled “A socioeconomic History of Electricity in Southern Nigeria, 1898-1972”.

Tracking the influence of theorists like Bruno Latour, his work connects with growing global interest, crossing many disciplines, in the history of networks. It also ties in with questions of development, and it spans the colonial and post-colonial periods of Nigerian history. In short, his PhD topic was exceptionally well-positioned.

When Damilola set out on his PhD journey, he wanted to work in the broad field of African economic history, or the history of technology. He discovered a reference to major investment in electrification in Jos during the 1920s, and his interest was piqued. He read more and discussed the question of electrification with his PhD supervisor Gareth Austin as a possible area of study. Damilola’s supervisor encouraged his historical and historiographic interest in electrification but cautioned that he needed to make sure that he could secure access to an adequately broad spectrum of archival material. Austin is a leading figure in African economic history, and this vignette emphasises how important the role of a supervisor is in navigating

an academic career towards promising horizons at that critical stage marked by the beginning of the doctoral study.

Damilola is the oldest of four children and like many African scholars (including this author) the first in his family to enter university. The potential pitfalls in the way of first-generation students are innumerable, but Damilola negotiated these on his way to the prized Cambridge doctorate. And in October 2020 he received news that his dissertation had secured final, formal approval from Cambridge. In addition to his academic work, Damilola is a family man, married and proud father to one son.

He has plans to publish journal articles and chapters out of his PhD. While much of his energy is currently devoted to building this collection of articles, he is also beginning to concentrate on another staging point along the way to a career as a professional historian, preparing a first monograph, tentatively titled *Electric Urbanism: Technology and Socioeconomic Life In Nigeria*.

Many early-career scholars have difficulty in imagining a research project beyond the PhD, the cluster of articles and the first book which emerges out of the doctoral thesis. Damilola has already given thought to this second phase of his research career and drawn some of the outlines for a new project that begins in the field where he undertook his doctoral research – what he is *known* for - but which progresses to broader historiographic, methodological and archival fields. In this phase of his research, Damilola intends to investigate the socio-cultural and economic life of western technologies in Nigeria since the mid-nineteenth century. He is keen to explore the political, intellectual, environmental, social and economic contexts within which western energy, communication and transportation technologies were introduced, hybridised, reinvented or discarded by Nigerians, all the while paying attention to the changes these technologies wrought upon Nigerian society.

When asked about the historical text which has most influenced him, Damilola did not hesitate to cite Anthony Hopkins' classic, *An Economic History of West Africa*.¹ Since the 1970s, this text has been massively influential in energising various waves of African economic history, and for Damilola, what is especially compelling about the text is Hopkins' capacity for synthesis. He remarked too on the extent to which it has informed his doctoral research, including sections of his thesis dealing with economic agency, planning, industrialisation and even technological developments that came decades after Hopkins published his book.

1 AG Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London: Longman, 1973).

Outside of academic work, Damilola likes to read biographies. He enjoys taking long walks, sometimes by himself and sometimes with his family. And he likes old sitcoms and he is currently watching *Desmond's*, which he finds fascinating for its insights into the everyday lives of the Windrush generation, people who migrated to Britain from the West Indies between the late 1940s and the 1970s.

In 2021 Damilola will be taking up a post as an assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina in Wilmington (UNCW). We can expect his ongoing work to contribute substantially to the idea of Southern history, notably what modernity, “development” and technology meant for Nigerian people and how people in that society defied, re-configured or repurposed these trajectories as they made their nineteenth- and twentieth-century worlds. UNCW is fortunate to have attracted a scholar of such promise. But it is also an indictment of persistent inequalities in global higher education that we are not able to retain a historian of Damilola’s potential in an African university.